

BALLAD HEROES OF ENGLISH AND TAMIL: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

S. SURESH

Professor of English, Arunai Engineering College, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

The Concept of Hero varies from time to time according to its function in the society. God is the first celebrated hero in the primitive society. In the successive periods kings and warriors were treated as heroes who protected their clan or society from natural and supernatural enemies. The contemporary literature have even witnessed anti heroes as protagonist of novels and plays. In the oral tradition, the heroic songs praised the deeds of common men who were referred to as 'folk heroes'. The folk heroes or the ballad heroes in almost all the languages were men who represented their society by their actions. They certainly will not conform to the qualities of Greek heroes or the ones prescribed by Hahn, Rank Raglan or Campbell. The essay traces the function of the ballad heroes in a comparative study of English and Tamil ballads. The study exhibits the fact that a hero's role is sophisticated in the English ballads where as in Tamil they play a more important role, that of a representative of the social values.

KEYWORDS: Folk, Protector, Common Man, Epitome of Social Values

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'Hero' itself is older than the origin of literature. The early concept of 'Hero' is derived from the Greek word 'Heroes', which refers to the main character in a literary work. The reception of the heroes in various cultures reflects the socio-political needs of the society. As pointed out by Stuart Blackburn the concept of the hero will convey different meaning to different groups according to their views (131). Accordingly a person who is looked upon as a hero in one society may be viewed as a villain in another society. Hence notorious characters like Robin Hood and *Cantāna Tevan* are celebrated heroes elsewhere. The hero in any art form should be a person with formidable qualities to receive admiration and respect from the folk who are ordinary mortals. The primitive society's hero worship cult personified great kings, warriors and soldiers in praise of their bravery. Since the function of the ballads and the oral songs in the primitive society is to entertain the folk, on the occasion of festivities other gatherings, even the mythic hero like Beowulf were treated as ordinary beings.

A ballad narrates a story, either of an action or an incident which opens abruptly and ends as abruptly. It does not give space for the development of the character of the hero as rapidness is the important quality of the ballad. A traditional English ballad is sung in the 'lyric' convention where as the Tamil 'Kathai Paatal' is sung in the 'epic' convention. A hero in the English ballad does the function of a main character, around whom the story is woven. But in Tamil Kathai Paatal the hero needs to express the cultural values of the society where he hails from. A ballad hero is the true representative of the people and he is the one who addresses their problems with care and concern. His action either defends the values of his group or opposes those who suppress them. As Stuart Blackburn Observes: "...the heroism of the local hero is the function of his humanness not his approximation of a god as with the puranic hero" (134).

Ballad Heroes

The History of the ballad heroes in both the societies indicates that the ballads or the oral songs of the earlier days had portrayed 'epic' or 'puranic' type of heroes, while the more realistic, nearer to life, 'folk heroes' are portrayed in the later periods. The heroes of epic convention are portrayed as sons of noble men who are bestowed with supernatural powers. Their actions focus on court and battle field. A folk hero or local hero is not of noble birth but of a very humble back ground. They protect the interests of the lower strata of the society and their actions happen in villages and the outskirts of a big town. The English society celebrated legends, kings, warriors and common men while the Tamil society praised the deeds of historical and social figures. In both the societies men gave importance to 'love' and 'chivalry' besides the topical themes. The English ballads were composed in the 'lyrical' convention while in Tamil they were written in the 'epic' convention. Unlike the ballads in English the Tamil ballads provide scope for the development of the 'hero' from child birth to maturity, reminding one of the bildungsroman novels. The actions and the composition of the ballads in both the cultures reflect the mental progression of these societies.

After celebrating legends like Beowulf and King Arthur, the English society turned towards more realistic heroes from the normal walks of life. They composed ballads with common heroes whose actions are earthly and endorse a moral code of behavior in the society. The first folk hero of England is Robin Hood who lived in the 14th Century England. His philosophy of rob the rich and serve the poor has become universal and people considered him as an evergreen hero. His pranks and tricks are enjoyed with good heart mainly because of his character. He never disturbed the good and the poor and remained loyal to God and king. As Prof Child remarks: "His love of fair play, his never forgotten courtesy, his respect for women and devotion to Mary make him the favor of all genial minds" (7). His character can easily be identified from his words that "God hears the man who often hears the Mass (X1). Besides Robin Hood, the outlaw, the most remembered heroes are Earl Percy and Earl Douglas of the old song Chevy Chase. This ballad has given not one but two heroes who are similar in valor and character. They match one another in thought and deed. Both stand for the pride of their respective nations.

Heroes at Cheviot Hill

A ballad hero should adhere to the morality of his country and his actions should bring honor to his people. Undoubtedly these two warriors are brave individuals who also represent their nation's pride. This border song when sung in both the nations praises the two heroes with equal importance. The brave heartedness with which they opposed the enemies and the kind heartedness with which they want to spare the lives of the innocent soldiers, parades their everlasting greatness. When Douglas was killed by an accidental arrow Percy exposes his human side utters thus: "Earl Douglas, for thy life/ would I had lost my land" (163-64). Joseph Addison in his admiration of the song compares the mutual admiration of the heroes of the ballad to the one in the Greek classics. The border ballads composed in Scotland and England portrayed heroes who were seen as representatives of their countries. They either come out victorious or die defending the pride of the nation and are praised as heroes in the ballads. The other heroes of English ballads play upon any one of the universal themes of Love, Greed, and Jealousy et al.

Heroes in Tamil Kathai Paatal

The Tamil society has witnessed two types of heroes that of historical and social. The heroes of history emerge as 'protector' of the clan against the foreign invasions, especially the British. Historical figures such as Tecinku Raasan,

Kattapomman and Poolitevan are still praised in songs in the regions where they lived in Tamil Nadu. All these heroes were defeated by the mighty opponent but not before they attain martyrdom. King Tecinku of Gingee is the blessed one with supernatural powers. He proves his cosmic connections in a very early age and is praised for taming a horse of celestial origin. But more than his valor, he is known for his humanness. In similar lines of the heroes of Chevy Chase he is remembered for the selfless love and affection for his friend. He kills himself, even though he was victorious in the battle against the nawab, unable to bear the loss of his friend Mowut Khan.

Kattapomman and Poolitevan are more recent freedom fighters of the Tamil Society. In an attempt to colonize the state, the British started collecting taxes from the local sovereign (paalayam) heads. Both these rulers refused to pay the tribute as they felt it is better to die as a patriot than bring shame to the pride of the nation. Though they taste victories initially they were routed by the mighty opponent through wily ways. Kattapomman was hanged and Poolitevan's demise is not recorded. But their patriotism was remembered in the 'heroic songs' even today. There are a few kings who are remembered in the ballads, not for their bravery acts, but for defending the pride of their clan or family.

The heroes of the social ballads stand for the cultural value of their group. Heroes like Cinnatampi, Maturai Veeran and Palavecan Cervaikaran are seen as fighters of the oppressors of the cultural values of their social group. Vaanamamalai based on his study of heroes of Tamil ballads identifies the following attitudes of the heroes of the social ballads: Impulse against dominating power structures and rise against oppression of any kind (6). These heroes fight the thing that a person can ever achieve on the earth and the Tamil society believed it as the shortest route to social, caste and familial injustices. The epic convention adopted in composition of the Tamil Ballads provides space for narrating the story of the Hero from his birth to death. It is therefore possible to register through these songs all the folk materials like folk beliefs, customs, myths, work, administrative and cultural process of the society. The oral tradition and the Sankam age which followed it, lavishly praises the deeds of the heroes. A hero is worshipped as god if he sacrifices his life for the sake of the society. A Heroic death is considered as a noble heaven.

The heroes of the social ballads were often portrayed as belonging to low caste and are engaged in revolts against the high class people's, especially the 'Brahmins', suppressing acts. Cinnatampi, a low caste person rose to honor and dignity by virtue of his talents, but is cunningly killed by the upper caste people. Maturai Veeran, again a low caste hero woos a king's daughter and marries her. But his lecherous behavior sees his fall. Palavecan Cervaikaran fight for the rights of the family and is killed treacherously. Since these heroes are darlings of the Tamil Folk they are given deification an act which is unique in the Tamil culture. That is, if a Hero suffers an untimely death, especially from the hands of the villains, they are bestowed with life and extraordinary power by the celestial force. The dead heroes rise to life, avenge their death and perish finally. People considering them as gods worship them on their anniversaries.

CONCLUSIONS

A comparative study of ballad heroes in both the languages posits the fact that they often are seen as simple men who begin their life as a normal person, but transformed into someone extraordinary by significant life events. They rise to the occasion in response to social injustice, and sometimes in response to natural disasters. Robin Hood's actions are respected by the common men, however notorious they are, because he waged war against the clergy of his days, which was corrupt and people are affected directly. The heroes in the ballads of both the languages stand for the cultural values which they represent. They are praised not merely for their valor but mainly for their characters. Earl Percy and Earl

Douglas of Chevy Chase and Raja Tecinku the king of Gingee are remembered even years after their death and are still praised in their regions for this reason. Common men identify themselves with such folk heroes of subaltern type and celebrate their deeds often. In Tamil Nadu many Dravidian leaders shot to fame and power creating and playing such folk heroes.

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